



Statement of the Problem and Rationale

Competency-based Education (CBE): Pathways to College, Career, and Life Ready Graduates

The Iowa CBE Collaborative

Initial Statement of the Problem and Related Research:

Books and reports continue to proclaim that our students are woefully unprepared for what comes after high school. Iowa, once the top in a nation on top, has slipped to the middle of the pack in a nation that has also slipped from grace. Yet, we have not lost ground in what we provide for our students; we have not “slipped” backwards. We are in the middle because of what is happening around us. Our system is not broken; it does exactly what it was designed to do. However, that world no longer exists. What it takes to be college and career ready has indeed changed. American farmers are still feeding the world and manufacturing is returning to the United States, but farming is increasingly dependent on technology and is highly collaborative while factories that once provided hundreds of low-skilled but high paying jobs now hire fewer employees most of whom are highly skilled technicians. Every student needs some type of post-secondary training to be successful in this economy. It is imperative that our schools not only embrace this change but envelop it and become bridges between our students and their futures.

We have been asking the questions about change for a couple of decades: How are students different? What has changed in the job market? How do we “keep up,”—or worse “catch up”—with the rest of the country/world? How has technology immersion affected this generation? Ultimately it comes down to one question: How do we prepare the next generation for a world we cannot even imagine? The paradigm shift required to answer that question goes beyond that which we have encountered in the past. Knowledge is no longer power; it is ubiquitous. The facts, the figures, the “how-tos” can all be googled or found on YouTube in videos created by 12-year-olds! In short, we already live in an anytime, anywhere, any pace type of world—a competency-based type of world—where if you can figure it out, you can do it.

Our students have changed because this is the world in which they have been raised. They are more connected and often learn more on their own time about their own passions than they do in school. They learn what they love because they are willing to invest their time learning it. Unfortunately, as Csapo (2007) reports, in school students “master a large body of knowledge but they are unable to apply it outside their educational context. In many cases, the application of knowledge is limited to the school subject in which it was acquired” (page 196). When they do not see the connections, it becomes irrelevant. However, competency-based environments connect learning to student passions and interests drawing them toward higher-order thinking and, therefore, deeper learning. In competency-based environments, the goal is not knowledge and understanding or in some cases even applying but analyzing, evaluating, and creating.

Rationale:

An underlying assumption that a classroom-based, homogenized system of learning prepares all students for life beyond high school is quickly being refuted. Growing evidence of a skills gap in which many young adults lack the skills and abilities needed to navigate this complex, global

society in which they live leaves far too many unprepared for college, career, and life. (Harvard 2011).

Current research shows that education is more complex than we have allowed it to be in the past. Students need the 3 R's but also much more. After 20 years of study, David Conley (2012) outlines four keys to college and career readiness on which all schools should focus: key cognitive strategies (ways of thinking), key content knowledge (foundational content), key learning skills and techniques (student ownership of learning and specific learning techniques), and key transition knowledge and skills (for navigation to life beyond high school).

The Innovation Lab Network (Council 2013), a partnership of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and ten state education agencies, advocates that all students be provided opportunities to “cultivate increasingly complex higher-order cognitive and meta-cognitive skills that will allow them to engage meaningfully with the world around them” (p. 5). They propose that all students should graduate possessing:

- **Knowledge** - mastery of rigorous content knowledge across multiple disciplines and the facile application or transfer of what has been learned,
- **Skills** - the strategies that students need to engage in higher-order thinking, meaningful interaction with the world around them, and future planning, and
- **Dispositions** – mindsets (sometimes referred to as behaviors, capacities, or habits of mind) that are closely associated with success in college and career. (p. 5)

Competency-based pathways provide the opportunity for students to engage with meaningful content in ways that encourage not only student agency and deeper learning but acquisition of critical knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for success in the 21st century.

Demonstration of proficiency related to rigorous expectations not only leads to greater student ownership and responsibility for learning but also helps educators and students eliminate false assumptions about student learning associated with points, percentages, and grades. The transparency about what is to be learned as well as the types of tasks and assessments incorporated into a competency-based system provide the information school personnel, students, parents, and community members need in order to make informed decisions about student learning and, therefore, advancement.

Competency-based education includes anytime, anywhere, any place learning. These pathways validate student learning that occurs outside the school building as well as in school but outside the traditional constraints of seat time and divisions of content areas. In other words, competency-based education allows students to learn and demonstrate learning more like they do outside school—and more like we do as adults in our daily lives—by learning what they need, as they need it, in a context that makes the learning relevant. These pathways enable districts and schools to provide student-centered, personalized learning systems through which students of all ages and ability levels develop both ownership and control of their learning. As the United States Department of Education acknowledges, competency-based pathways present “an opportunity to achieve greater efficiency and increase productivity” (UADE 2012).

Although other states have implemented CBE, the concept is new enough that each has a slightly different definition and process. The Iowa CBE Collaborative will bring together theorists and practitioners to define, develop, and clarify not only what it means to provide a competency-based education but the partnerships, supports, and professional development necessary to make this type of transformational change.

Resources:

- Conley, D. (2012). *A complete definition of college and career readiness*. Eugene, OR: EPIC.
Retrieved from
https://www.epiconline.org/publications/documents/College%20and%20Career%20Readiness%20Definition.pdf?force_download=true
- Council of Chief State School Officers. (2013). *Knowledge, skills, and dispositions: The Innovation Lab Network state framework for college, career, and citizenship readiness, and implications for state policy*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from
<http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/ILN%20Knowledge%20Skills%20and%20Dispositions%20CR%20Framework%20February%202013.pdf>
- Csapo, B. 2007. Research into learning to learn through the assessment of quality and organization of learning outcomes. *Curriculum Journal*, 18:2, 195-210.
- Harvard Graduate School of Education. 2011. Pathways to prosperity: Meeting the challenge of preparing young Americans for the 21st century.
- USDE. 2012. <http://www.ed.gov/oii-news/competency-based-learning-or-personalized-learning>